

The Algerian Identity Sandwiched Between French and Arabic Monolingualism: An Analysis of Assia Djébar's Selected Works

الهوية الجزائرية المحصورة بين أحادية اللغة الفرنسية والعربية: تحليل الأعمال المختارة لآسيا جبار

Zineb Boumaza¹ *

Dr. Fethi Haddouche²

1 Laboratory of the Arabic language, Ali Lounici Blida 2 University, Algeria,
ez.boumaza @univ-blida2.dz

2 Ali Lounici Blida 2 University, Algeria, fethi-h@yahoo.fr

Received 15/07/2022 Accepted 09/09/2022 Published 23/09/2022

Abstract:

This paper close reads Assia Djébar's *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry* to showcase the effects of monolingualism on the Algerian identity under French and Algerian rule. This work also assumes that Djébar attempts to achieve a linguistic armistice and reconciliation between languages in Algeria post-independence to reach unity and a solid national identity. In this respect, the present paper analyses Djébar's plots and literary devices to capture her political stances and endeavors.

Keywords: Algeria, Assia Djébar, Identity, Linguistic division, Monolingualism

ملخص:

تقرأ هذه المقالة عمل لآسيا جبار بعنوان "دماء اللسان لا تجف" لعرض آثار أحادية اللغة على الهوية الجزائرية في ظل الحكم الفرنسي والجزائري. يفترض هذا العمل أيضاً أن جبار تحاول تحقيق هدنة لغوية ومصالحة بين اللغات في الجزائر بعد الاستقلال للوصول إلى الوحدة والهوية الوطنية الراسخة. في هذا الصدد، تحلل هذه المقالة القصص القصيرة لجبار وأدواتها الأدبية للتعبير عن مواقفها ومساعدتها السياسية.

الكلمات المتاحية: آسيا جبار، أحادية اللغة، التقسيم اللغوي، الجزائر، الهوية

1.Introduction:

Prior to the French colonialism, the Arab and Amazigh tongues co-existed in harmony despite Arabic being the first language. Mohamed Benrabeh, in this context, argues that the Ottoman Empire followed a multiple cultural model policy in its conquest of Algeria, that is, Arabic 'remained the common liturgical language' whereas the Berber tongue symbolized tribal and collective identity (Language Conflict in Algeria, p 23). It is important to mention that the darija drifted from standard Arabic and reflected previous conquer imprints by preserving a part of their dictionary (like chicklet from Spanish, scula from Roman, Khlas and Gazuz from Turkish). This, in fact, permitted the inclusion of the different minorities and identities. Therefore, ethnic groups inhabited Algeria in an orderly fashion. French powers, however, gradually set Algeria as a monolingual country speaking the French tongue only from 1830 to 1962 (Malika Rebai Maamri, p 77, Benrabeh, p 24). This condemned Standard

* Author Corresponding

Arabic and lead to its almost complete demise. Upon independence, as a backlash, Algeria launched a process of de-frenchification to restore its Arab identity. However, the totalizing Arabization policies, as per Michelle Roberts, were more offensive than the French linguistic imposition (p, 111) for it first put its French speaking population at disadvantage overnight, and second it did not secure a transitional period essential for a successful shift back to Arabism. This, according to Djamila Saadi-Mokrane, has created a language and identity conflict which can explain the current political situation in Algeria (p 45).

Based on close reading of four of Djébar's short stories (from *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry*), the present investigation aims to demonstrate the effect of the language clashes on the Algerian identity after independence. The latter is achieved through inspecting Djébar's literary devices and plots. This article also aspires to shed light on how the linguistic war in Algeria impacts Algerian female identity.

2. The Algerian Linguicide from Colonialism to Independence

In *The Algerian Linguicide*, Saadi-Mokrane contends that Algeria was destined to a "death of languages" approach since the French occupation; Arabic was the target of linguicide during colonial rule, and French and Berber became the new targets post-independence (qtd in Brahimi, p 254). Anne E. Berger, on the other hand, in *Algeria in Other(s)' Languages: Toward a rethinking of Algeria's linguistic predicament*, describes the Algerian tongue as multilingual shifting between Arabic, French and Amazigh. She stresses that monolingualism obliges individuals to choose one facet of their identity, and thus it denies them "of the very possibility of being Algerian" (2014, p 45, 46). That is, monolingualism causes frustration to the Algerian individual who struggles to identify themselves outside other languages that constitute the person they are. This article, in this way, scrutinizes the effects of monolingualism on the Algerian identity under French and Algerian rule.

2.1 .The French Linguistic Oppression and the Algerian Identity

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that colonialism takes two steps. First, it overthrows the local culture, religion, history, education and literature. Second, it promotes and elevates the colonial language (p, 16). Along the same lines, Berger claims that the teaching of the master's language aims at detaching the colonized from his mother language and culture to attach him to the "fatherland" (2012, p 13). Language, is, thus, the mechanism French powers utilised to obliterate the Algerian identity.

The French oppression of the Arabic language/identity started with the Clauzel Resolution of June, 1830. The latter convicted pilgrimage and considered it as a means of religious fanaticism. It also destroyed mosques and turned them into churches and military barracks. This was France's first endeavor to dismantle the Algerian Identity from its religion (French plans to raise a Christian generation of Algerians). As the teaching of Islam—in the Algerian context—go hand-in-hand with the Arabic language, the Decree of October 18, 1892 prohibited the institution of Arabic academies. This included the omission of the Algerian historiography and Quran from school curricula. Here, France not only attempted to obliterate the Algerian tongue and religion, but it also targeted the raising of a generation ignorant to its own history. In this respect, the Chautemps decree interdicted the usage of Arabic in schools, and even set it as a foreign language in 1938.

French policies continued to assault the Algerian identity until 1954. It approved the teaching of Arabic in schools—due to resistance, but professors had to demonstrate French eloquence. Moreover, to contain Arabization, Arabic was taught only on the secondary level

(Labid, 2015). That is, France wanted to impede the nurturing of the Arabic tongue at a young age. In other words, French powers purposefully banned Arabic in primary schools to raise a French-educated generation. These oppressive rules resulted in a linguistic contamination that could not be cured after independence.

2.2. Arabization and Identity Post-independence

Upon Independence, Algerian officials followed a counter-effect policy of Arabization to defrenchify the national identity. This involved the establishment of Arabic as the first language. It also meant that Arabic was the official language in administrations and public institutions such as schools. The linguistic handicap of the Algerian population—post-independence—required the importing of teachers from Egypt and Syria to teach Arabic (Kepel 2002, p 163). Gradually, Algeria could raise an Arabic-educated generation; yet, it did not prepare them for the job market (Evans 2007, p 95). To be precise, high positions and well paid jobs were destined for French speakers, which eventually created tension and a gap between Arabophones and Francophones.

Arabization raised anti-western sentiments amongst the Arabic speaking masses who perceived their Algerian Francophone counterparts as traitors to the national cause—re-establishing a Muslim and Arab self. Moreover, the unemployability of this category intensified tension between both groups. In fact, Martin Evans and John Philips, in *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, stress that Arabization reforms nurtured hatred towards the French intelligentsia, especially women (2007, p 132). They argue that Arabophone youths reproached Francophones for their joblessness. Most importantly, they directed their energy towards the French-educated women (Evans and Philips, p 133).

Frustration mounted within Arabophone youths. Accordingly, they joined extremist groups during the 1990's war and participated in the intellocide and femicide of the French intelligentsia. This war fractured more the Algerian identity as it set apart people into Arabophones, Francophones and Amazigh. In this way, the clash between languages undermined the national identity and hindered unity. This is why Berger argues that Arabization was as oppressive as the French colonialism to the national identity (2014, p 46); it muted Algerian tongues, and thus a part of their identities. Djebbar, in her work, projects this conflict between languages, and how it impacts national stability and identity.

3. The Algeria Identity through French Literature

Sophie Croisy, in *Algerian History, Algerian Literature, and Critical Theories: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Linguistic Trauma and Identity Reformation in Postcolonial Algeria*, explains that French is a language the Algerian intelligentsia used—during colonialism—to provide the world with an overview of the colonial experience (2012, p 88). She argue that French was a mechanism of resistance to French colonialism. Yet, its usage altered during the Black decade; the new oppressor became the GIA. In this respect, French intellectuals condemned the FIS' fanaticism in their French tongue (Croisy 2012, p 88). This practice heightened tension between both groups, and translated in lots of literary works like Djebbar's.

In the forward note to *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry*, Djebbar confesses that her writing during the Black decade was influenced by the situation in Algeria; She also admits that she writes for the Algerian woman; she hopes she can change the reality of things for her by writing her miseries and stories (1997, p 197). In *Assia Djebbar-Interview en 1990*, Djebbar justifies her dependency to French with her French education that taught her to think and interact in this language. That is, through her writing, Djebbar also aspires to achieve a language armistice as French remains part and parcel of Algerian identity. This article focuses on three short stories from *The Tongue's Blood* collection.

3.1. *Oran, Dead Language*

This short story opens *The Tongue Blood Does Not Run Dry*, and it mourns the death of the Algerian tongues under the French colonialism. In fact, Leonard R. Koos, in *Djébar, Assia. The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry*, claims that this work is perceived, by many critics, as an endeavour of reviving Arabic and Amazigh narratives and rhymes; it also tries to picture the sufferings of women in Algeria, mostly during the 1990's civil war (2006, p 60). Yet, we believe that this short story and the title particularly, reflect the duality of the duality of the Algerian identity.

The story is narrated through an 'unnamed' female character who takes us through her journey of shifting between Arabic and French. The story captures the instability of the Algerian identity due to the clash of languages. Moreover, it portrays the effects of French colonialism on identity formation. We can observe this in the protagonist's mourning of her mother's death. She says: "I let her. I wanted to be dead. Asleep or dead, like my mother. "Maman!" I called her by the French "Maman"—she who was assassinated by the French" (Djébar, 15). It is conspicuous that the protagonist is aware of the French linguistic imposition, but she is unable to speak a different tongue. This reflects how French policies succeeded in dismantling 'Arabic' from Algerian identity during colonialism. As a matter of fact, if we join the two parts of the title, we infer that the protagonist's native language was massacred. This is what Djébar expresses through her title; Colonialism produced generations that could not speak its mother tongue.

Going back to the mother's death, we can detect the protagonist's revulsion of French powers. However, she spends her adolescence longing for departure to France. Eventually, at the age of eighteen, she leaves to pursue her higher education studies. She declares: "I am going away forever. I had decided. As a negation of people, of places, of things" (1997, p 14). We can understand that the colonial experience affected the protagonist's perception of home. After her parents death, Algeria becomes a foreign land and France becomes the new home. This is exactly what Ngugi describes as colonial efforts to detach the colonized from their mother environment (1954, p 15). Berger, in the same context, contends that the teaching of the colonizer's language aims at detaching the colonized from his mother language and culture to attach him to the "fatherland" (2012, p 13). It becomes clear that the protagonist's attachment to France is an outcome of the French linguistic hegemony.

The protagonist's mother moves between France and Algeria during her *jihād* time. Thus, the aunt becomes the new mother for the ten year old child when her mother is away. In this respect, the protagonist calls her biological mother 'Maman', and she calls her aunt 'Mma'. Djébar deliberately chooses two mothers for her character to symbolize the input of both Arabic and French to Algerian identity—the protagonist in this case. This also hints on the destructive effects of monolingualism that repressed Algerian identities from evolving. Djébar, through her writing, wants to exhibit the linguistic contamination of Algerian identity that cannot be undone. This can be seen in the following exchange between the protagonist and her *Mma*:

"SO which one is the real mother for you: 'Mma'" indicating my aunt, who suddenly looked uneasy, "or 'Maman,' as you say," pointing toward the distant horizon, in the direction of my heart's beloved, my absent fairy.

"...Both of them are my mother." (p 23)

This showcases the integrality of the French language in the Algerian identity, and at the same time it indicates that the foundations of the Algerian self cannot be overturned. In this

manner, Djebbar implicitly addresses the linguistic “tyranny” in Algeria and calls for an acceptance and reconciliation between languages.

3.2. *The Attack*

Djebbar chooses another female protagonist for this short story. Naima, the Arabic teacher, narrates her husband’s and her fear during the civil war of the 1990’s. Mourad challenges the GIA’s and FIS’ ideologies which brings him threats of death if he maintains his writing. Nonetheless, the husband continues to denounce the extremist doctrines which results in his shooting in public in the presence of his wife. This story is inspired from reality in Algeria in the 1990’s where French teachers and intellectuals received threats of being murdered. In other words, this incident depicts how the linguistic division butchered Algerian unity, stability and identity.

Days later, Naima sums up her work. She tries to escape her husband’s murder in her classroom, yet a student protest about her usage of one French word puts her again in that situation. Naima narrates the story as follow:

“I’m not sure why, But it’s French that comes naturally when I make a sharp retort, “Eighteen? You have eighteen and that’s not enough?”

Actually, I only say the number “eighteen” in French, and then the rest, which is meant only as a teasing joke, is in the Arabic dialect. Suddenly, the boy who’s around fifteen, stands up and with his head turned partially toward the others, snaps back, “Do we have a teacher of French or of Arabic?” (P 93)

It becomes conspicuous that the Arabized generation was raised to hate both the French language and French speakers regardless of their Algerian beingness. Djebbar also wants to show that this new generation is disconnected from the previous ones because of the linguistic division. Accordingly, this generation cannot relate to the previous one, and thus can be easily manipulated to be hostile towards the Francophone generation due to the absence of sentiment and attachment. In other words, Djebbar cleverly pictures the damage caused by Arabization to the national identity. She argues that “fanaticism prevents the making and remaking of language, of identity” (qtd in Croisy, p 92)

The student’s reaction provokes the teacher’s memory and anger. She says: “I react, protest, I stand up to him passionately. In reality, it wasn’t just the young man and his refusal of this French word that I felt up against!” (p 93). We can understand from Naima’s words that the student represents the Extremist groups that are intolerant to the French language and speakers. This again reflects the situation in Algeria during the Black decade. Finally, the teacher responds:

“Yes,” I mock bitterly. “You can’t tolerate a foreign word, a simple word? What country do you live in? What kind of future do you want? I am an Arabic teacher of course, but Mourad was the best French teacher in the country” (p 94).

We can infer that Djebbar wants reconciliation between languages for a better Algerian future. Moreover, ‘What country do you live in’ reflects the linguistic tyranny in Algeria, and at the same time it hints on the long lasting effects of colonialism on the Algerian identity that cannot be denied. Finally, the marriage between the Arabic and French teacher symbolizes the possibility of a harmonious existence of both languages in Algeria.

3.3. *The Woman in Pieces*

This story also narrates the life of a teacher, a French language teacher. Atyka, like Mourad, is threatened of murder for teaching French and not wearing the veil. These threats do not pressure the protagonist to wear hijab which results in her slaughter in front of her students in class. The narrator describes the armed men’s invasion of Atyka’s class and her murdering scene:

“[Atyka] stares at them and in Arabic she asks forcefully, “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Inspection!” one responds in French. His gun rests in a sling. He takes out a kind of notebook.

...The hunchback, like a dancer or madman, approaches the first row of students and brandishes his knife to the left and to the right...He sniggers loudly. “Go on! Go on, kids, close your eyes or lie down under the tables!” he orders them in the local Arabic dialect. “Get out of my sight! You don’t need to see. It’s the ‘teacher’” he says this one word in mangled French. “She is condemned!” (p 122).

Atyka’s speaking of Arabic represents the integrality of Arabic in the Algerian identity. In other words, Djébar demonstrates that, despite speaking French, Francophones still hold onto their ‘Arabic’. That is, both languages constitute their identity. On the other hand, the assassinator’s usage of ‘inspection’ and ‘la prof’ in French portrays the everlasting effect of the French imposition i.e. his identity is linguistically contaminated as well; he is just ignorant of it. The assaulting of the teacher, in class, illustrates the absence of support to women in the 1990’s (Mortimer 2015, p 64).

In her last breaths, Atyka continues to narrate the story she was teaching which reflects women’s resistance and perseverance during the Black Decade. Unable to finish, the teacher passes her notes to Omar who reads the rest of the story. Djébar, through the note passing, pictures how women share and transcend their miseries through the generations. It also symbolizes a hope of continuing to defend and guard women’s rights. Omar symbolizes a new generation that is tolerant to the French intelligentsia. He also represents the teacher’s (women’s) efforts in denouncing extremism and raising a generation that is knowledgeable of the integrality of the French language in Algerian identity. Unlike Naima’s student, Omar is tolerant to his teacher’s tongue, and even continues her fight.

3.4. Armand Karim and Ourdia Louise

Armand Karim and Ouardia Louise are the two narrators in Félicie’s Body—the closing novella of *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry*. Julija Sukys writes, in *Language, the enemy: Assia Djébar’s response to the Algerian intellocide*, that Félicie (a French wife to an Algerian husband) gives her eight children bilingual names to sustain the duality of their identities: French and Algerian (p,120). She adds that Félicie’s children reject their “hyphenated identities” as “Choosing sides has become a necessity since it is the only way to remain whole” (p,120). In this way, Sukys highlights the rigidity of the modern Algerian society that does not tolerate plurilingualism. Indeed, in this short story Djébar perfectly demonstrated the effect of language oppression on Identity formation and development.

Armand Karim and Ouardia Louise feel the duality of their names, each, like their siblings, struggling to maintain a unitary wholesome identity. Armand voices this frustration as follow:

But you see us divided, each with our two first names, our two countries (which to disown, which to adopt?), our two religions absent or in the background, our two ages as well (always children for you, the mother, even though we are well into adulthood), each of us staggering differently through bitterness, uncertainty, or hope (p, 159).

We can understand what Sukys describes as a necessity to remain whole. Dual names, cultures and languages threaten Félicie’s children’s identities. The latter, due to the political situation in Algeria post-independence, cannot survive the linguistic tyranny with their duality. Eventually, the children’s dual identities becomes a burden they cannot live with. Thus, they all stick to one side either Arab, and thus remaining in Algeria, or French and

hence moving to France. Armand comes before Karim which projects the child's decision. Armand Karim chooses to identify himself as Armand and lives to France.

Ourdia, unlike Armand, choose the Arab identity and settles in Algeria. Yet, similar to her brother her dual name perturbs her identity and self perception. She questions her parents' doing as such:

Why didn't they call me Louise or Louisa? Louisa would be better, because it reflects both of them, the French mother and the Algerian father [...] with the eight children, they each had to see their offspring from their own side, in his or her language and in their religions, because what's a first name, if not a matter of religion? (p, 169-170).

We can observe that the duality in Ouardia's identity is a production of her parents' inclinations, cultures and beliefs. Ouardia is the fruit of a mixed marriage that represents the language wedding between French and Arabic, mainly. Yet, the intolerance to the French language urges the child to hinge on to one language, culture and identity. Ourdia pictures her frustration as follow: "It's as if when we were born you told us, there, you've got two sides, two faces.." (p, 171). We, therefore, can say that the Arabic monolingualism fractured the Algerian identity post-independence because it eliminated its other tongues.

Edward Said, in *Out of Place: A Memoir*, narrates his journey with his dual names, cultures and identities. He confesses that it took him fifty years to feel less uneasy with the paradoxical combination of his name: Edward and Said (1999, p 1). The same case applies to Armand Karim and Ouardia Louise and Algerian citizens with dual names, cultures and passports (mixed-marriage children). Djebbar, in this work, portrays the complexity of the Algerian identity post-independence. It also shows how language division displaces the individual's self.

4 Conclusion:

Assia Djebbar demonstrates the effect of French and Arabic monolingualism on the Algerian identity. She exhibits how French colonialism oppressed the Algerian tongues (mainly Arabic) which dismantled the national identity, and how Arabization policies caused more damage (following the same monolingual steps). Djebbar pictures the instability and complexity of Algerian identity through symbolism, juxtaposition and paradox mainly. In her stories, she narrates the sufferings of Algerians with much stress on the female experience. Language is the centre of problem in these stories. It constantly threatens the security of the characters in question, and it also generates anxiety and frustration. In this fashion, Djebbar shows how the linguistic conflict in Algeria threatens and unbalances the national identity.

Djebbar targets a reconciliation between languages in Algeria to attain unity. She also hopes to achieve a 'linguistic armistice' to terminate the fluidity of the Algerian identity. Most importantly, she writes with a hope that the oppression of women stops, and that the lives of women change for the best. In a nutshell, Djebbar's work offers an intricate picture of the Algerian experience during and after independence. Additionally, it condemns the linguistic division and calls for a language reconciliation (reconciliation of identity).

List of references:

- Benrabeh, M. (2013). *Language Conflict in Algeria From Colonialism to Post-Independence* . Multilingual Matters.
- Berger, A.-E. (2002). *The Impossible Wedding. Nationalism, Languages and the Mother tongue in Postcolonial Algeria*. Retrieved from Academia:
https://www.academia.edu/40224228/The_Impossible_Wedding_Nationalism_Languages_and_the_Mother_Tongue_in_Postcolonial_Algeria20190901_35384_7zsv5i

The Algerian Identity Sandwiched between French and Arabic Monolingualism : An Analysis
of Assia Djébar's Selected works
Zineb Boumaza & Fethi Haddouche

- Croisy, S. (2008). Algerian History, Algerian Literature, and Critical Theories: An interdisciplinary Perspective on Linguistic Trauma and Identity Reformation in Postcolonial Algeria . *Penn State University Press* , 84-106.
- Djébar, A. (1990). *Assia Djébar - interview en 1990*. (F. Sadki, Ed.) Retrieved August 12, 2020, from Youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlsyp1VwpMw&ab_channel=FloridaSadki
- Djébar, A. (1997). Felicie's Body . In A. Djébar, *The Tongue's Blood Does not Run Dry* . The Seven Stories Story .
- Djébar, A. (1997). Oran, Dead Language. In A. Djébar, *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry* . Seven Stories Press.
- Djébar, A. (1997). The Attach. In A. Djébar, *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry* . The Seven Stories Press.
- Djébar, A. (1997). The Woman in Pieces. In A. Djébar, *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry* . The Seven Stories Press.
- Fanon, F. (1965). *A Dying Colonialism* . Grove Press .
- Koos, L. R. (2007). Djébar, Assia. *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry*. *Translation Review* , 58-61.
- Maamri, M. R. (2009). The Syndrome of the French Language in Algeria. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* , 77-89.
- Mokrane, S. (2002). the Algerian Linguicide. In A. E. Berger, *Algeria in Other's Languages* (pp. 44-58). Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Mortimer, M. (2005). Edward Said and Assia Djébar: A Contrapuntal Reading. *Research in African Literatures* , 53-67.
- Said, E. (1999). *Out of Place: A Memoire* . Vintage books.
- Šukys, J. (2004). Language, the enemy: Assia Djébar's response to the Algerian intellocide. *Journal of Human Rights* , 115-131.